

THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUALITY – SERVICE OF OTHERS

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Spirituality is the essence of life. It is the light that shines on our lives, illuminating our paths, bringing light to the darkness, joy to the sorrow, and meaning to the incomprehensible. And the essence of Spirituality? The essence of spirituality is service. As one goes deeper and deeper on a spiritual path and as one gets closer and closer to Realization and Enlightenment, one realizes that the Divine resides in all. One begins to see God's presence in every person, every animal, and every plant.

The first line in the Ishopanishad says:

Isha vaasyamidam sarvam
yat kincha jagatyaam jagat
Tena tyaktena bhunjeethaa
Maa gradhah kasya svid dhanam

This mantra tells us that God is manifest in everything in the universe. All is Him, and all is pervaded by Him. There is nothing which is not God.

Thus, when one realizes this Truth deep in one's heart, one becomes filled with an insatiable desire to care for and serve all of God's creation. Typically, we sit in our mandir and ever-so-carefully bathe the deity of God. We gingerly and lovingly perform the abhishek ceremony, caressing His body lovingly with sandalwood and rose water, and adorning Him in the finest clothes. We offer food to Him before we eat; we distribute the sweetest sweets as Prasad and we offer our hard earned money as "daan."

However, as one's spiritual path deepens and as one gets closer to the state of God Realization, one sees God's form in everything. Thus, the feelings of care, love, sacrifice and devotion which we feel for the deity in the temple begin to blossom in our heart for all of creation.

Every widow, every orphan, every homeless leper, every wandering, malnourished animal, every deforested piece of land, every polluted river becomes as precious as the marble image of Shiva or Krishna or Durga in our mandir. Thus, from our hearts we are called to do as much as we can to remedy the world's tragic situation.

Many people think a spiritual life means that one retreats to the mountains, performs meditations and then lives peacefully forever in one's own enlightened cocoon. However, that is not true, deep spirituality. That is not the essence of enlightenment. Yes, solitude, silence and intense sadhana are crucial in order to establish the connection with God, in order to make the leap from a material life to a spiritual life. It is difficult, initially, to connect deeply with God while one stands in line at the supermarket or while one is stuck in traffic on the road home from work. Thus, in the beginning, one must retreat temporarily. This lays the ground work. It is like wiring a house for electricity. In the beginning, when the house is being built, one must carefully lay all of the wires. Much time is spent on this initial electrical wiring. However, once the lines have been laid, once the electrification work is complete, then one simply has to plug the cord into the socket and the lamp immediately illuminates! One does not have to re-wire the house each time!

The same is true on a spiritual path. Yes, solitude, silence and extensive sadhana are required, as a parallel to laying the electrical wires. But, once the deep connection with the Divine Powerhouse is established, one simply has to close one's eyes and one connects with God.

Look at Lord Buddha – he left the world in order to go into the forest and practice meditation. But once he attained enlightenment under the boddhi tree, he did not stay in the forest, reveling in his own enlightenment. Rather, he returned to the world to spread the message, to spread the light, to spread compassion, to serve the needy. He had attained Enlightenment and once having attained the Enlightened state, he was able to see the Divine in all. Thus he dedicated his life to spreading light, wisdom and compassion to all.

Look at Ramakrishna Paramhansa, one of the greatest saints in history. He used to bow down in pranam to prostitutes and worship them as the Divine Mother. He lay in the grass and talked to the snakes and the rabbits. He saw the Divine just as clearly in the impure prostitutes as in the image of Kali in the temple!

In the Bhagavad Gita, Bhagwan Krishna says, "I am the Self, O Gudakesha, seated in the hearts of all beings; I am the Beginning, the Middle and also the End of all beings." When we embark on a spiritual path, or as we walk the path, we must dedicate ourselves to cultivating the divine vision and awareness with which we can see the Divine in all.

Once we see every being as Divine, we cannot walk by someone who is suffering without helping them. We cannot sleep at night unless we have done our best to lessen the pain of our fellow beings, just as we could not sleep if we neglected to perform the aarti in the mandir or if we forgot to offer food to the deity of Krishna

Bhagwan. We cannot see sick, starving animals wandering on the road or watch toxic chemicals dumped into our precious rivers, any more than we could tolerate watching someone toss a Shiva Linga onto the pavement.

So, ultimately, if the spiritual path is true, it culminates in an insatiable urge to serve all, to help all, to give to all, to live for all.

This does not mean that one forgets one's personal meditation or japa, but the two go hand in hand. There is a beautiful line in our prayers that says, "Mukha mein ho Rama Nama, Rama seva haath mein." Our lips keep chanting His name, and our hands keep doing His work.

Also, it is important to note that "service of all" can take a variety of forms. For some, it may take the form of working hard at their profession every day and donating their income to humanitarian causes. For others, it may take the form of founding organizations or foundations which directly work to alleviate various aspects of suffering. For some, it may take the form of giving lectures or writing books on spirituality which bring inspiration and upliftment to the masses. For some, it may take the form of being a spiritual guide or Guru who brings the light of awareness to all of his/her devotees. The possibilities are endless. But the central core is the same – all of these people have a deep realization that all beings are Divine and that God resides in all. And once one has this realization, one feels unity with all creatures and beings on the planet; thus one hears the internal call to help and serve in whatever way possible.